

## **ranscript**

0:02

today is May 15 1997 I'm speaking to you

0:06

from John J College of Criminal Justice

0:09

we are very pleased on this day to have

0:12

an interview with Dr Robert Merton

0:16

conducted by a former student Albert

0:19

Cohen it is very much worth noting that

0:23

this will be the first interview on oral

0:26

history that Dr Merton has granted and

0:29

we are extremely pleased to have him and

0:32

Dr Cohen this day thank

0:36

you go ahead Robert in your

0:40

uh the uh article that you wrote in this

0:44

collection called the legacy of anom

0:47

theory yes you write at considerable

0:50

length and

0:52

detail about the role of micro

0:56

environments on the shaping of people's

0:59

thinking

1:00

the ways they Define problems how they

1:03

go about them and so on specifically by

1:07

micro environments we mean the context

1:10

of teachers and students and fellow

1:14

students and so on when we deal with in

1:16

face-to-face interaction and that how

1:18

shapes our

1:20

thought uh you deal with this subject

1:23

mostly in relationship to the

1:26

development of anomie theory

1:30

which the

1:31

original the founding document was I

1:33

think

1:34

1937 ssna 38

1:38

38 uh the uh in dealing with the

1:42

elaboration of anom theory uh the

1:46

contributions that students made to its

1:49

further elaboration so on I don't recall

1:53

that there is any discussion of that

1:56

nature about the initial formulation

2:00

of the paper itself the first rather

2:05

brief document called social structure

2:08

and an me which later on took it on a

2:11

life of its own and grew and grew and

2:13

grew but uh I and I've wondered about

2:16

that how do you do you have any

2:18

Reflections on the way in which your own

2:20

encounters with teachers and students so

2:23

on or whatever bore upon the initial

2:26

formulation of this rather powerful idea

2:31

oh I have a very very

2:35

distinct uh

2:37

recollection which I think is in part

2:40

confirmed here and there by documentary

2:44

materials

2:46

uh I wasn't fully aware of it at the

2:49

time this is in

2:51

retrospect it all started for me in the

2:55

early 1930s when I was a graduate

2:58

student at uh Harvard

3:01

and uh became interested in what was

3:04

emerging as a functional

3:07

orientation and sociological thought

3:10

largely derivative from the functional

3:14

work of Radcliff

3:16

Brown and alavi in anthropology and

3:19

deriving my opinion ultimately from

3:23

durkheim and so uh when I finished my

3:26

own studies formal studies as a graduate

3:31

student I

3:34

uh wanted

3:36

to develop a

3:38

formal exposition of what functional

3:41

analysis amounted to and in the event I

3:45

did and as was to be the case for the

3:48

rest of my academic life I developed it

3:51

in lectures to students to begin with so

3:55

there was

3:56

the uh micro environment to begin with

4:00

uh I don't know whether the year that

4:02

you were in the course in which I

4:04

presented that do you recall whether uh

4:08

I dealt with the social structure anomaly

4:10

and oh yes I first encountered it during

4:12

that course 1939 and that's why I have

4:15

distinguish between what I call AO

4:18

publication which as the term suggests

4:22

means thinking it allowed in the

4:24

presence of some audience and printed

4:27

publication publication by the way way

4:30

uh you may think that's an oxymoron AAL

4:33

publication seems to clash as a notion

4:36

but of course it doesn't puara means to

4:39

make public and you can do it in any

4:43

number of ways including the current one

4:45

which is aut publication going on at

4:47

this very

4:48

moment so uh how did that end up in ssna

4:53

in my opinion the following way I

4:55

developed something I called a paradigm

4:58

of functional analysis now this was

5:01

quarter Century or so before Tom Coon's

5:04

structure of scientific revolutions gave

5:07

a very special and Powerful meaning to

5:10

the notion of Paradigm I had a a a more

5:14

limited notion namely a formal statement

5:17

of the underlying assumptions the

5:18

fundamental concepts the

5:21

problematics and the mode in which this

5:25

kind of analysis would take course

5:29

and doing that I became powerfully

5:34

impressed by the way in which functional

5:36

analysis had centered on functions on

5:39

the positive consequences of structures

5:41

and of agent actors operating within

5:45

social structures and so I turned to the

5:49

correlative notion of dysfunctions the

5:52

notion I took from medicine and

5:55

biology and started to look at the

5:58

dysfunctions the ne negative

6:00

consequences for the structure and for

6:02



indiv classes of individuals within the

6:05

structure of anything that was being

6:07

explored and so it was uh when

6:13

I presented uh some ideas on bureaucracy

6:17

I focused on the dysfunctions of

6:19

bureaucracy whereas Marx babber who of

6:22

course created the tradition of work in

6:25

bureaucracy had only uh centered on

6:28

positive function

6:30

uh when I came to uh think of social

6:35

Conformity I said but what about social

6:38

deviation deviant behavior and again it

6:41

was on what seems to be dysfunctional

6:44

but I

6:45

assume concluded that that wasn't the

6:47

interesting problem as you know the

6:50

problem was what makes for what makes

6:53

for deviant behavior and particularly

6:55

for differential rates of deviant

6:58

Behavior among very parts of the

7:00

population so that's the most General

7:03

theoretical context of how

7:06

ssna appeared in the lectures at first

7:09

and then found print in

7:11

1938 you you mentioned uh I think like

7:14

feudal societies for

7:16

example where most people are

7:20

poor where discrepancies in wealth are

7:25

enormous uh and where deviant may be on

7:29

a very small

7:30

scale and I remember if I

7:33

may hearken back to my own First

7:37

Impressions when I first read social

7:40

structure in anme you make that point

7:43

there and to my

7:46

mind the principle meaning or intent

7:51

perhaps of that essay was to talk about

7:57

differences amongst systems yeah sort of

8:00

crosscultural comparative sociology of

8:03

deviant and I thought wow this is great

8:07

uh but it's my impression that the

8:09

theory has seldom been used that way

8:12

most people think of it as a theory of

8:14

deviance in the United States there's no

8:17

question

8:19

Al that you've

8:21

pinpointed an aspect of the original

8:25

formulation which is Central to the

8:28

original formulation and secondly that

8:31

it was never followed up either by me or

8:34

in any substantial scale by others if

8:37

you go back to the various editions of

8:40

ssna and there have been about five over

8:42

a period of uh 20 years or

8:47

so uh it I I simply put the comparative

8:52

analysis to one side just as you declare

8:55

it uh for what reasons

9:00

simply because uh my style is not that

9:03

of a

9:04

comparativist it is an effort to focus

9:09

on the what shall I say the internal

9:12

workings of a society and move in that

9:15

direction but the original paper starts

9:18

with the comparative mode just as you've

9:20

outlined it and it's an interesting uh

9:25

to me an interesting example of a very

9:27

uh very widespread phenomenon in the

9:31

history of

9:32

science

9:34

namely uh the emergence of ideas that

9:37

are carried a certain distance and then

9:40

are lost and View and then are

9:44

rediscovered often

9:46

independently independently and

9:49

developed in fact uh two of my

9:52

colleagues Harriet zukerman the

9:54

sociologist and Joshua leberg and Noel

9:57

La biologist

9:59

have jointly published a paper called

10:03

postmature discoveries to refer to that

10:06

phenomenon namely a

10:10

discovery that could have been made

10:14

there were no obstacles to it no

10:16

technical obst time was r no it is time

10:20

is ripe is a cheap meaningless uh

10:24

superficial evasion of the problem it's

10:27

it's discarding the problem problem too

10:29

easily you have to identify in what

10:32

respects the time was not right but I

10:35

won't get into that at any rate in my

10:37

case you you've said it all for me uh my

10:41

style of work was not comparativist I

10:44

was led to think of the comparative

10:46

context if I hadn't it wouldn't have led

10:49

me to the focus of American on American

10:52

society as

10:54

distinctive and the anomaly the Paradox

10:58

the

11:00

irony was here is the American

11:04

dream that in its own way inadvertently

11:09

contributes to high rates of deviant

11:13

behavior when coupled with a social

11:17

structure class structure I repeat

11:21

ethnic structure gender structure that

11:23

makes for differential access to the

11:26

opportunity structure the changing OPP

11:29

unities not only for economic success I

11:32

want to emphasize

11:33

that to my mind ssna deals with access

11:38

to all sorts of opportunities making

11:40

friendships entering into different

11:43

social and cultural

11:45

systems put this discussion now in the

11:50

framework of quote String Theory okay uh

11:59

the I think it was Travis Hershey who

12:05

uh first used the expression to

12:08

characterize a whole class of

12:10

theories more

12:12

recently

12:14

uh agu has been talk about Robert agnu

12:19



has been talking about uh General

12:21

strength Theory and uh these

12:26

two contexts of use are very very

12:28

different

12:30

uh with respect to AG news work and his

12:34

rather considerable I guess

12:36

following

12:39

uh I was

12:41

wondering what thoughts you might have

12:46

regarding uh the placement of social

12:50

structure in

12:52

animy as an instance of something called

12:57

strain theory

13:00

I elaborate on the question but I

13:03

won't it would help me enormously AI if

13:07

you were to take a minute or so to give

13:10

your your

13:13

understanding of the two kinds of

13:17

strength Theory not because I am

13:20

publicly announcing my ignorance I just

13:23

finished the forward to a forthcoming

13:26

book called the future of adimy theory

13:34

edited

13:36

by nipus and Robert agnu in the in that

13:41

volume which I read with some care

13:44

there's a great deal about strength

13:46

Theory just as there is in the recent

13:49

volume the legacy of animy

13:53

theory but it would I think for our

13:56

conversation would help me enormously if

13:58

you'd give a

13:59

a succinct summary of what you take to

14:01

be these two versions of strin theory

14:04

and then I'll try to

14:05

[Music]

14:07

respond you mean Hershey and agnu

14:12

or uh I thought I was going to get to

14:14

ask the questions today after all these

14:17

years uh well Hershey uh identifies a

14:22

whole class of

14:23

theories um that uh purport to uh

14:27

explain the Deviant as a consequence of

14:31

something aberrational something wrong

14:34

something that's gone wrong somewhere

14:36

that U theories that are built on the

14:38

premise that Conformity is more or less

14:40

natural because man is a social being

14:43

and uh so you explain deviants by uh uh

14:48

finding psychological or other kinds of

14:51

deprivations and problems and so on um

14:55

and so you would be a strin theorist I

14:57

would be a strin theorist and

15:00

um they uh is in contrast to the notion

15:05

that devian comes more or less naturally

15:07

to people what has to be accounted for

15:09

is

15:10

Conformity uh

15:13

agnu uh and inant I have the feeling

15:17

that when Hershey uses the term there's

15:20

something pejorative about it it's clear

15:23

where he stands well no question the U

15:27

when agno uses the term strin theory he

15:31

uh he he accepts uh as social anomy

15:36

theory as as legitimate and powerful and

15:40

uh and deserving of high respect but he

15:43

he said there are at the center of of uh

15:49

anim theory is a notion of

15:51

strain the no attendant upon disjunction

15:55

right between gods and and so on so

15:57

people feel strained and devian is one

15:59

way of resolving the strain or dealing

16:01

with it and he said well there are lots

16:03

of other kinds of strain that people can

16:05

experience growing out of all kinds of

16:08

socially structured circumstances and

16:09

otherwise and he wants to investigate

16:13

those across the

16:14

board uh then anom

16:19

theory in which strain is a function of

16:22

a particular structural situation

16:25

becomes one instance amongst

16:27

many uh

16:30

and it was really mainly to your

16:32

thoughts about that that my question was

16:36

directed well I I I think I showed

16:39

unaccustomed wisdom in asking you to

16:41

summarize it because I couldn't have

16:43

done it with such a

16:46

finesse um just a word or two about

16:49

Travis Hershey I think you captured the

16:53

essential

16:54

argument and uh the reason I don't find

16:58

it compelling or leading to any

17:01

modification let alone rejection

17:04

of social structure an anomy thought is

17:09

that it is essentially a a an evaluated

17:14

but judgmental remark that uh I why do

17:18

you make these assumptions but the

17:21

assumption is not there the imputed

17:24

assumption is not in social structure

17:26

Anatomy at all that is to say the most

17:31

the modal response in social structure

17:34

and thaty four-fold table the very first

17:38

one is Conformity that's right and that

17:43

is not assume to be necessarily a

17:46

psychological attribute again but

17:49

because social systems provide the bait

17:52

the reward systems the reward and

17:55

Punishment systems to make for

17:57

conformity

17:58

so his premise which he imputes to me is

18:02

one that has no place in the original

18:04

argument so that's so much for Hershey

18:08

if he were here I'm sure the

18:09

conversation would go

18:12

further uh with regard to the agu again

18:15

where I think you capture both the core

18:18

of his uh argument precisely I agree

18:23

with that I agree with the core of his

18:25

argument uh and uh

18:30



the only departure that I would propose

18:34

from what he is

18:36

suggesting is that social structure

18:38

Anatomy is not that special a case not

18:43

that delimited a case and let me try to

18:46

elucidate that you may recall well as

18:50

I've been saying every five or 10 years

18:52

in print over a 50 or 60 year per 60e

18:56

period

18:57

now uh look fellows it's all in the

19:02

original statement and in the subsequent

19:07

uh paradigmatic essays on anomy theory

19:11

that I've put forward from time to time

19:15

it is all there namely the theory is

19:19

not introduced to account only for

19:23

deviant Behavior with regard

19:26

to economic

19:29

success it is much more General than

19:32

that the very notion of opportunity

19:35

structure once it was introduced namely

19:38

as changes in the distribution and

19:41

character of opportunities in the course

19:43

of

19:44

time which has its own problematics that

19:47

I don't go into what produces those

19:50

changes in Opportunity structure but

19:53

those don't refer only to economic

19:56

matters we have opportunity

19:59

to find a mate and that was one of the

20:01

earliest uh applications I gave when you

20:05

have different distributions of men and

20:07

women what we used to call boys and

20:10

girls uh in a local community you are

20:13

influencing the opportunity structure

20:15

finding a suitable mate they are not

20:17

only the numbers of the two genders the

20:21

two Sexes but their class distribution

20:24

and a whole set of such problems and so

20:28

Peter black has been developing that

20:30

over the past 20 or 30 years that

20:32

implication of opportunity Structure

20:35

Theory so my only difference with Robert

20:38

agnu is he I think is understandably

20:42

focused on Deviant Behavior but ssna is

20:46

not confined uh confined to phenomena of

20:51

deviant that's been that was its source

20:55

that was its focus but it is an effort

20:58

to deal with differential access to

21:02

differing opportunity structures now uh

21:06

we're at a point now Al I feel where we

21:10

need a a

21:12

seminar for at least a semester or a

21:15

year or so to explore the question

21:18

you've introduced but I think it's

21:19

important that you got it on on the

21:21

record so say on this AAL record there

21:25

have been papers on

21:29

the application or applicability of

21:33

uh anom

21:35

Theory opportunity Structure Theory

21:39

to uh white collar crime more

21:43

specifically the the crimes and the

21:46

devian of

21:48

organizations but I would say

21:50

collectivities when I say collectivities

21:52

I'm emphasizing the fact that these

21:54

organizations are socially treated as

21:57

actors that do

21:59

things and

22:01

uh this raises some questions

22:05

about

22:07

the fit or the relevance of a notion

22:11

like

22:13

opportunities anom me the whole the

22:16

whole thing

22:18

to explaining the behavior of

22:23

organizations and I think especially the

22:25

problem of our organizations can they

22:28

legit legitimately be treated as

22:29

entities as actors or just a lot of

22:32

people or

22:34

whatever well the focus there it's it's

22:37

a correlative of

22:39

course it's quite recent development is

22:42

a correlative to both anime Theory and

22:47

to

22:49

southerland's differential association

22:52

theory I say it's a correlative because

22:55

as you know

22:59

I am so delighted you were introduced as

23:02

my student because for decades I have

23:05

said well that's been lost sight of

23:08

since uh most historians of social

23:11

science would say that Albert K Cohen

23:14

was southerland's student well I think

23:17

we can share you anyway back to your

23:20

that's a digression and the some of us

23:23

tend to

23:24

digress uh in variably and I'm Bel in

23:28

that uh

23:30

category uh

23:32

Southern really introduced a minor

23:35

revolution of thought when he introduced

23:38

the very term and concept of white C

23:42

crime and that meant that you no longer

23:47

could uh assume that official crime

23:50

statistics for example as gathered up by

23:54

the

23:55

FBI and that's a long story we can't go

23:58

into to here uh may give a somewhat

24:02

misleading notion of the distribution of

24:04

deviant Behavior now with this new focus

24:09

on Deviant behavior of organizations

24:13

rather than of individuals in certain

24:17

social uh

24:19

positions uh combines organizational

24:23

analysis and deviant Theory deviant

24:27

Behavior Analysis

24:29

uh I think uh that in large degree ssna

24:36

Theory can can in part be applied to

24:40



those phenomena of organizational

24:44

deviant if you think about the reward

24:48

system in of

24:51

organizations they they're rewarded for

24:53

growth they are rewarded for as growth

24:57

as registered let's say in the stock

25:01

price they the individuals who man the

25:05

organization in turn are being judged

25:08

within the reward system over the short

25:11

run as we know now if you think about

25:15

that there's a gold definition of how

25:18

have you been doing recently which puts

25:21

enormous pressure on those occupants of

25:25

the positions who are uh those occup an

25:28

of positions in organizations that are

25:31

responsible or judged responsible for

25:34

the outcome so you you do have so to say

25:38

a shared a collective concern with

25:41

getting on with it and some fraction of

25:44

the response to that will lead to the

25:46

kinds of organizational

25:49

misbehavior that has now become uh so

25:53

familiar I don't think that uh it is

25:57

simp

25:59

uh historically contingent as I've just

26:02

indicated because some of those same

26:04

pressures probably existed earlier but

26:07

you can see how there is a formal

26:10

resemblance between the shape of such

26:13

analys the shape of such organizational

26:16

analysis and the structure of anim

26:27

Theory for

English (auto-generated)